# FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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## WORLD POLITICS SIS 105

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bringing with it the erosion of liberty, the abuse of power, ethnic divisions, and even war. Eighty years ago, Woodrow Wilson took America into the twentieth century with a challenge, to make the world safe for democracy. As we approach the next century, our task is to make democracy safe for the world.☯

# INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT/ ETHNIC CONFLICTS:

# The Troubled History of Partition

*Radha Kumar*

### BOSNIA GOES THE WAY OF CYPRUS

THE SEPTEMBER elections in Bosnia highlighted what was until then an implicit aspect of the current peace: it is more likely to move Bosnia toward the ethnic states for which the war was fought than to reestablish the multiethnic Bosnia that once was. Indeed, as the Dayton process unfolds, it becomes clearer that the peace agreement signed in November 1995 after three and a half years of war was something historically familiar: a so-called peace accord that is in reality a partition agreement with an exit clause for outside powers.

At the same time, while key aspects of the document, such as the creation of two "entities" with virtually separate legislatures, administrations, and armies, tend toward partition, the pact attempts to get around some of the more hostile legacies of partition through a common economic space and arms control, and it creates structures that could reverse the partition process by returning refugees and rebuilding civil society. So far, these structures have been dormant, and the holding of national elections in a still highly uncertain peace marks the tilt toward partition. As was widely predicted, the Bosnians gave their ethnic leaders new mandates, and Bosnia took another step toward partition. However, the postponement of the municipal elections due to irregularities in voter registration means the international community is not yet in a position to accept partition as the democratically expressed will of the people.

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RADHA KUMAR, a Warren Weaver Fellow at the Rockefeller Foundation, is the author of the forthcoming book *Divide and Fall: Bosnia and the Annals of Partition.*

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*Palestinian riot police prepare to confront protesters
on the West Bank's border, September 1996.*

The Bosnian war and the Dayton peace agreement have reignited
a debate on whether partition is an effective solution to ethnic conflict.
Although Bosnia is the starting point, the arguments in this debate
have broad resonance at a time in which the rapid spread of ethnic
and communal wars east and south of Bosnia is of increasing con-
cern to the international community. Defenders of partition make
an argument that runs as follows. When an ethnic war is far ad-
vanced, partition is probably the most humane form of intervention

because it attempts to achieve through negotiation what would otherwise be achieved through fighting; it circumvents the conflict and saves lives. It might even save a country from disappearing altogether because an impartial intervenor will attempt to secure the rights of each contending ethnic group, whereas in war the stronger groups might oust the weaker ones. In fact, its advocates say, the ideal strategy for resolving an ethnic conflict is to intervene and take partition to its logical conclusion by dividing a country along its communal battle lines and helping make the resulting territories ethnically homogeneous through organized population transfers. This will ensure that partition is more than a temporary means of containing conflict. Less thorough partitions, however, can still be a lasting means of containment.[1]

Partition, however, has its own sordid history, not arising as a means of realizing national self-determination, but imposed as a way for outside powers to unshoulder colonies or divide up spheres of influence—a strategy of divide and quit. Although described as the lesser of two evils, the partitions in Cyprus, India, Palestine, and Ireland, rather than separating irreconcilable ethnic groups, fomented further violence and forced mass migration. Even where partition enabled outside powers to leave, as in India, it also led to a disastrous war. Often thought of as a provisional solution, it has been unable to contain the fragmentation it triggers among dispersed or overlapping ethnic groups that are not confined by neat geographic boundaries, and it gives birth to weak civil institutions demanding supervision. Similar conditions ensure that the partition of Bosnia, which from the start should have been reintegrated, will also amount only to a policy of divide and be forced to stay. The Dayton accords should not evoke memories of Munich, but rather of Cyprus.

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[1]For examples of this view, see John J. Mearsheimer, "Shrink Bosnia to Save It," *The New York Times*, March 31, 1993, p. A23; Mearsheimer and Stephen Van Evera, "When Peace Means War," *The New Republic*, December 18, 1995, pp. 16-21; and Chaim Kaufmann, "Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars," *International Security*, Spring 1996, pp. 136-75. Kaufmann goes so far as to suggest that after an international military takeover, international forces should intern "civilians of the enemy ethnic group" and "exchange" them once peace is established.

### THE ROAD TO QUITTING

THE ARGUMENT for ethnic partition is not new, but its terms changed considerably over this century before settling upon the current rationale of the lesser of two evils. Before World War I, most partitions were effected for the needs of empire, to strengthen rule or simplify administration. After 1918, however, colonial empires were increasingly challenged, and subsequent partitions took place as part of a devolution of authority or a Cold War policy of spheres of influence. There were two distinct rationales for the partitions resulting from the fall of colonial empires: Wilsonian national self-determination, applied to Poland and Romania, and the British colonial policy of identifying irreconcilable nationhoods, applied in Ireland, India, and, as a delayed response, Cyprus and Palestine. Though both rationales took ethnic identity as an important determinant of political rights, Wilsonian policy supported ethnic self-determination as freedom from colonial rule, while the British reluctantly espoused partition as a lesser evil than constant civil war.

After the last attempt to ratify a partition—Cyprus after the Turkish invasion in 1974—the notion that partition was an effective solution to ethnic conflict fell into disuse for a quarter-century. Paradoxically, its revival followed hard on the heels of German reunification and the potential integration of Europe that it heralded. In the first phase of the revival of partition theory, Wilsonian self-determination was invoked more often than the lesser-evil argument. Indeed, the prevailing feeling was that the end of the Cold War—and the relatively peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union—meant that separations could be negotiated. In the early 1990s the most frequently cited example of a peaceful negotiated division was Czechoslovakia's "velvet divorce." When asked on *The News Hour with Jim Lehrer* in November 1995 whether the Dayton agreement was a partition, Assistant Secretary of State Richard C. Holbrooke said he preferred the example of Czechoslovakia's voluntary dissolution. But fewer people now refer to the Czech split. That the Czech Republic and Slovakia were relatively homogeneous and that dissolution of the federation did not require an alteration of internal borders or a substantial displacement of people make the comparison with Bosnia untenable. A comparison between Bosnia and the partitions of Ireland, India, and

Cyprus, or the incomplete partition of Palestine, would be better, because each involved ethnically mixed and dispersed populations and each was held to be a pragmatic recognition of irreconcilable ethnic identities.

It is worth examining these partitions' relevance to Bosnia in more detail. All relied heavily on the lesser-evil argument, but in at least two of them the decision for partition was prompted not by a desire for peace and self-determination, but because the colonial power, Britain, wanted to withdraw. The recognition of irreconcilable nationhoods followed as a consequence—it would be easier to withdraw quickly if the aims of the ethnic leaders were fulfilled by territorial grants. Looking back on the 1947 partition of India in 1961, former civil servant Penderel Moon summed up as "divide and quit," in a book of the same name, the British policy of pushing partition through without establishing the boundaries of new states or planning for the wars that might ensue; it was the post–World War II imperative of quitting that drove the decision to divide, he said. It was arguably the post–World War I imperative of quitting the Irish conflict that led the British to espouse a partition of Ireland.

> Colonial powers' desire to withdraw, not self-determination, drove past partitions.

That both divisions were driven by considerations extraneous to the needs and desires of the people displaced does not necessarily mean that partition was not a solution to their conflicts. However, as in India and Ireland, partition has more often been a backdrop to war than its culmination in peace; although it may originate in a situation of conflict, its effect has been to stimulate further and even new conflict. Indeed, India's experience raises the question of whether a peaceful transition to partition is possible. India's political leadership agreed to partition the country before the spread of large-scale conflict; the 1947 partition agreement between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League was intended partly to prevent the spread of communal riots from Bengal in eastern India to northwestern India, which was also to be divided. But the riots that followed in 1947-48 left more than a million people dead in six months and displaced upwards of 15 million.

Moreover, partition arises in high-level negotiations long before it becomes evident on the ground. The British partition of Ireland in 1921

was a late addition to negotiations for home rule during the 1919-21 Anglo-Irish war for independence, but partition had been on the drawing board since 1912, when it was suggested by a group of conservative and liberal members of parliament that Protestant-majority counties be excluded from the proposed Irish Home Rule Bill. Calls for partition were renewed in 1914, 1916, and 1919; the offer of a double partition of Ireland and Ulster based on religion led to the spread of conflict between English and Irish across the south, west, and north of Ireland, escalating to guerrilla warfare when Catholic rebels formed the Irish Republican Army in 1919. Nor did the war end in 1921 when Britain negotiated a treaty with Sinn Fein, the political arm of the IRA, offering dominion status to southern Ireland in return for a separate Ulster under British administration. The decision to accept partition led to a split in Sinn Fein, and internecine conflict was added to communal conflict, ending two years later with the defeat of the faction led by Eamon De Valera. It took almost four years of war to achieve the partition of Ireland, and those four years were themselves a culminating phase in a movement toward partition that had begun ten years earlier.

Significantly, the British rejected the partition option in Palestine in the same years that they espoused it in India. The two reasons they gave were infeasibility and the risk of a military conflict that would involve an expanded British presence. Although partition had been proposed in 1937 by the Peel Commission, which concluded that cooperation between Jews and Arabs in a Palestinian state was impossible, and had been the subject of debate in Britain throughout the 1930s, in 1946 the British members of the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry argued that because ethnic groups were so dispersed, partition would entail massive forced population transfers, and that the territories created—a tiny Arab state, a Jewish state in two parts, and three blocs under continuing British administration—would be infeasible. Moreover, they said, moves toward partition could cause a war. In 1947 the British referred the dispute to the United Nations. The Security Council opted for partition, with a special U.N. regime for Jerusalem and a continuing economic union for the whole of Palestine. The plan required Britain to undertake a substantial role in its implementation, but after the Ministry of Defence forecast that Britain's military presence would have to be reinforced in the wars that would follow, Britain

announced that it would withdraw in May 1948. In April the Jewish Agency, which represented the Jewish community under the British mandate, announced that it would declare a Jewish state when the British withdrew. War broke out, resulting in a kind of skewed partition by which one new state was created but not the other. Subsequently there have been three Arab-Israeli wars, and the issue of territorial feasibility continues to dog the peace process.

In many ways Cyprus offers the most striking parallels to Bosnia, and its history again raises the question of whether a peaceful transition to partition is possible. Although the British proposed the partition of the island in a divide-and-rule move in 1956, they subsequently rejected the plan on the same grounds as in Palestine—infeasibility and the risk of conflict. The British-brokered constitution of 1960 that made Cyprus independent was an attempt to avert division of the island between ethnic Turks and ethnic Greeks, but the idea that ethnic politics could be contained by providing for ethnic representation at every level proved a failure. The constitutional creation of separate municipalities and a distribution between the two ethnic groups in the presidency, legislature, civil service, police, and army added communal (that is, interreligious) conflict to internecine conflict. In 1963 the "Green Line," the first partition boundary to be drawn, divided Greek and Turkish Cypriots in Nicosia, the capital. Ethnic conflict only intensified, and a Turkish Cypriot declaration of support for partition followed in 1964. Although U.N. troops arrived that year, tensions escalated, with a counter-declaration of unification by Greece and Cyprus in 1966, a military coup in Greece, renewed conflict in Cyprus, a Turkish Cypriot announcement in 1967 of a Provisional Administration, increasing Greek support for the radical Greek underground in Cyprus, and finally a Turkish invasion in 1974 that reinforced the de facto partition of the island. Thus it took 14 years to establish what continues to be a shaky partition of Cyprus.

### FOMENTING CONFLICT

How SUCCESSFUL have these partitions been at reducing conflict and permitting outside powers to end their involvement? It is not clear that the partitions of Ireland and Cyprus can be said to have worked, even in the lesser-evil sense. Although the former was a move to divide and

quit—in which all sides accepted division as the price of self-determination—the British are embroiled in a military operation in Northern Ireland that continues 70 years later. The troop presence curtailed the toll that communal conflict might otherwise have taken; indeed, it could be argued that it contained the Irish conflict and kept deaths to a minimum. But it also brought the conflict to the heart of Britain as the IRA mounted terrorist attacks in London to increase pressure for a British withdrawal, and it could just as well be argued that from the British point of view independence would have been a more effective way to contain the conflict because it would have thrown the onus of peace onto the Irish; moreover, it might have encouraged regional compromises rather than a prolonged stalemate.

> Attempts to make one ethnic group dominant in a territory risk further fragmentation.

The partition of Cyprus can only be described as a partition by default that the U.N. presence inadvertently aided. The conflict following independence in 1960 was compounded by the fact that Turkey, Greece, and Britain were appointed protecting powers by the constitution. The formal structure this gave to a wider engagement in the conflict drew both the Greek and Turkish armies in and permitted international acceptance of Turkey's invasion in 1974 and what was until then a de facto partition. While casualties have been restricted since then, the division of Cyprus is little more than a long standoff that remains volatile and continues to require the presence of U.N. troops. Nor can the conflict be confined to Cyprus. Over the 20 years since partition, its short fuse is evident. A violent demonstration by Cypriots in August 1996 resulted in Greece and Turkey threatening war. The costs of containment, therefore, include permanent vigilance on the part of NATO and the Atlantic allies.

In many ways, despite the violence and displacements it produced, India's was the most successful ethnic partition, both because it allowed the British to quit and because the conflicts that ensued were by and large contained. But this had less to do with the wisdom of ethnic separation than with other factors, among them the subcontinent's distance from Europe. Unlike Ireland, Cyprus, and Bosnia, the Indian subcontinent is so large that a dozen or more new states could